



## IT'S THE RSN0 BUT NOT AS YOU KNOW IT. WELCOME TO A PROJECT THAT LETS MUSICIANS DO THEIR OWN THING

It can't be easy being an orchestral musician. All those years of study and practice, and you end up stuck behind a music stand, taking orders from a conductor. OK, it's not quite as bad as all that – but don't they ever yearn for a bit more...well, freedom? The Royal Scottish National Orchestra clearly imagined that might be the case, and that's the thinking behind the orchestra's intriguing *Times' Sharp Tooth* project at Glasgow's Tramway on Friday.

It's the RSN0, but, as they say, not as we know it. "The idea was to give people the chance to explore some avenues of music-making that might be slightly off the main path of what a symphony orchestra usually does," says the orchestra's associate leader William Chandler. To that end, composer and conductor Peter Wiegold has joined the RSN0 musicians for a fresh new way of approaching music. "We've got a series of what I call one-page scores, by some very interesting composers," says Wiegold. "They become the backbone of what we play – we add things to them, we improvise around them. It's not a million miles from jazz."

"The scores have just a few fragments of music on them – sometimes just a bit of melody, or even just a rhythm. It's almost like we're looking at a very loose guideline," Chandler adds. And Wiegold stands out front as ringmaster: "I use hand signals – like Miles Davis and Frank Zappa did, for instance – to indicate what I want to happen. One means repeat, another means play a solo, another means copy someone else, and so on. Sometimes I just open my hands and say: 'go – do something, with total freedom.' I explain how it works to the audience beforehand, and if they're in on it, they can watch the thing being created before their eyes. And they can see the danger – if I suddenly make a big solo sign at someone, for example."

Having a finger pointed at you



Composer Peter Wiegold, main; the RSN0's associate leader, William Chandler, inset

and being expected to come up with a solo on the spot can be terrifying, of course. And that kind of pressure takes classical musicians a long way out of their comfort zones. "We're specifically trained to interpret written music, so suddenly being let loose like this is a bit like jumping out of an aeroplane," admits Chandler.

For Wiegold, though, it's all part of the process. "I remember one RSN0 player – on the first day he said he wasn't at all sure he wanted to do this; on the second day he said it was so much harder than orchestral playing because you have to be alert all the time; and on the third day he said it was so much easier than orchestral playing because you can make your own decisions. That's pretty much the ideal scenario."

So much for what the players get out of it – what's in it for an audience? "It's crucial that we produce a professional performance," Wiegold accepts. "If you start saying it's all process and no product, nobody respects that. It's certainly not just therapeutic for the players – it's about making good art in a slightly different way, with the involvement and engagement of the players."

That "good art" is a free-form show involving orchestral music, vocals and readings, all based around the book *Invisible Cities* by Italian author Italo

Calvino. "Basically it's Kublai Khan asking Marco Polo to describe the 50 best cities in the world, but Marco Polo's reply is to describe Venice in 50 different ways," says Wiegold.

Each composer producing one of these one-page scores to be in-

terpreted by the musicians takes a phrase from Calvino's book as their starting point: John Woolrich's is *Times' sharp tooth*; James MacMillan uses *Memory is redundant*; Wiegold himself chooses *Farewells take place in silence*; and Oliver Searle has *The termite's gnawing*. "They're all really evocative phrases," says Wiegold, "and as we're working with sophisticated musicians, no doubt we'll get some Stravinsky or Monteverdi, or references to other composers associated with Venice."

And as well as producing what promises to be an entertaining if somewhat experimental evening, what do the two performers think will be the longer-term outcomes for the RSN0? "For a start, the players get a much closer relationship with each other," says Wiegold. "In the orchestra, it's easy for the violins to think that the trombones are just those noisy people 40 feet away from them – but if you get a violinist improvising with a trombonist, of course they develop a very close musical relationship."

For Chandler, there are aspects he'll take back into his more traditional orchestral playing. "It gives you a new kind of confidence," he says. "And it sharpens our ears, in terms of how we listen to each other and react to what we're all doing. It's increasing our versatility of style, too – that's something we've always worked on, but this is pushing us even further." Will RSN0 performances ever be the same again? Find out how the players adapt to their new freedom at the end of this week.

*Peter Wiegold leads a group of players from the Royal Scottish National Orchestra in Time's Sharp Tooth at Tramway, Glasgow, on 21 February, [www.rsn0.org.uk](http://www.rsn0.org.uk)*

*Ken Walton is away*

